

THE HOPE OF GRACE REALIZED

John 1:1-18

Its Christmas Eve day. A time of worship, a time of reflection, a time of hope. And that hope is the theme that has been the thread of our services these past 4 weeks. Hope from different people, in different times, experiencing different emotions and thoughts and ideas and yet all falling into *hope* for this exact day. For this moment. For this *hope* that comes. Because tomorrow we celebrate the birth of a King. The birth of our Savior. Immanuel: God with us.

But how could this be? This is just a simple child born of a simple woman?

But we know the truth. This child by no means is simple. This is no ordinary boy. He will become no ordinary man...for he is THE Son of God and is himself, God. This is the boy child that has been foretold by prophets so long ago. This is the child that will be born in Bethlehem to a virgin – who will room in a manger where sheep and oxen lay. A miraculous event filled with other miraculous events surrounded by more miraculous events because all of this should not happen and COULD not happen any other way but by God.

One of my favorite Christmas stories is how Luke tells of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2. In Luke's birth narrative we read how Shepherds were out in the fields nearby and an angel of the Lord appeared to them and told them of this great news. And how as this angel spoke the glory of the Lord shined around them. This light just comes bursting through – flooding the area. And the angel says, "*Do not be afraid, for I bring good news that will cause great joy for all people!*" And then a legion of angels appear and praise: "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests!*" Angels... declaring this good news. *Hope* is brought to all people. Light is shining in the darkness. Angels sing of his name. This, is not, your normal child... and this is NOT your typical welcome into the world! My parents never told me any angels or angel did that for me, and no matter how often I tell my kids how special they are – I'll be the first to admit there were no angels announcing their birth either. This is what Micah prophesied and many before and after, what the angel had told to Joseph and Mary and the hope that all of them had in this very day, this very act, this very culmination of all of God's goodness and love and mercy and grace and peace and so much more!

And while John 1 isn't your typical "advent" text it definitely is adventy. Because it speaks of the birth, the coming into the world but it declares the "why" to Christ. The *why* to the Messiah. The *why* to the Savior of the world. The why for the hope we cling to, need, and declare on December 25th.

Read John 1:1-14

In the beginning, Christ was. He wasn't just a thought, a hope, a "plan B" for the world...he was...and he was the *Word*. He was, as John Calvin states, "*The eternal wisdom and will of God and the expressed image of his purpose.*" And God, expressing his joy, his love, his pain, his desire – sends his Son, the Word – Jesus Christ, into the world to give life. Life to those things that were created – and it's not just people...but all of creation. Plants, animals...all things seen and unseen. It is through Christ that these *things*, and that *we*, have life.

And this is important for John to establish right at the get-go. John writes to believers to help them in their faith – but he also rights to those who are struggling with believing. And so he starts right off at the beginning with not only stating that life is in Christ but declaring that IF we say that, if we say we are given life in Christ and that Christ gives life to all things...that there then is a union with God that we have. Christ, is that union. Both before time, before creation but as well as after creation up and through and past his coming.

And we truly get a snippet of what that means when we look at Immanuel. Christ always was and always will be. This child always was and always will be the *reason*. Because this child will grow up and bring light into the darkness – just as those angels sang of life and light then bursts throughout the skies and surrounding areas as we see in Luke 2. Light that not only *sheds* light but light that brings forth goodness. Light that removes darkness, that removes pain and suffering. And just as light brightens the darkest of darkness and brings things to life...we are comforted in knowing that darkness can never overcome light. Sin, evil, chaos cannot dim the light of Christ – the light this baby brings. He cannot, and will not, be extinguished. This child will share wisdom, bring healing, bring joy and laughter to all those who believe...and he will save us from our fallen state. John 1:1-18 is all of that. All of those statements and so much more.

Christ truly is the hope of the world.

This day is the expectant hope we read and walked through from Micah 5:2-5a in our first week of Advent. It's reclaiming and living into what hope means and actually *having* hope because we get the necessity of Christ, we get the necessity of his birth, his grace, the hope of this child and the hope of his return. Because it was promised. Because it was foretold – because God holds firm to that which he declares.

This day is the fulfillment of the hopeful plan of God as we experienced in our second week of Advent when we looked at Matthew 1:18-25 in how Joseph finally got and understood what God was doing. That God's plan was always there – that this plan, this day – was written in stone before the world began. As I said earlier Christ, Immanuel, was not a plan B but a plan A. And that because this day and time and year and month and exact time of this event event was all planned out there was nothing that Joseph could do or anyone else to stop it. No amount of more

sin could enter into the world to stop Christ's coming. No amount of darkness would push or recede the light from bursting through. And Joseph got it. Joseph understood with a little coaxing from an angel. God's hope for all humanity was coming through and Joseph then turned the hope he *had*...to the hope God *brought*.

This day is the hope we got to experience through the eyes of a young lady who was emotionally charged and living into the hope of the past, present, and future of God's promises, goodness, and hope of peace. Mary's song (Luke 1:46-56) was the reminder of God's continuous work in the lives of his people. That God didn't just have the plan set and then sat back and waited for said date. He was continuously working, restoring, bringing redemptive-hope to those who believed, saw, experienced, and clung to his very word. Hope to people who were marginalized, under tyranny, and oppression. Christ would be the one who sets people free.

Today...is all of those and so much more. Because now...we get to live into the hope...of grace.

Hope of grace. That has a really nice ring to it – doesn't it? It's what John declares all of this is about. That "From the fullness of his grace we have received one blessing after another." That from the law to the truth of Jesus Christ we receive, see, and experience God. So Christ becomes the hope of grace then *realized*...felt...experienced...and given. But not only from grace ...but on top of it as well because verse 16 says it's "grace *in place of* grace". Other translations say it's "grace upon grace", or "one gracious gift after another", and one says, "one gracious *blessing* after another." Either way it's this understanding that we have been given abundantly more than ever given. But it's abundantly more than abundantly more because it's the culmination of not only everything given and done by God in the past but it's all things coming to him and in Him today.

And what's so wonderfully humbling is the understanding that if grace is something we've been given and yet never deserve Christ gave us more. So we already had it but now we receive more of it. Grace...upon grace.

Think about that for a second. We've talked a lot about grace here – and for good reason. Grace is actually a very simple and yet complex word. Its forgiveness, it's kindness, it's good will, manifest graciousness, favor, credit...and benefit. It's all those things that we need and cannot get on our own and it's simply set in our lap. You don't have to get up and take it, you don't have to complete a task – it's freely offered AND GIVEN to you. God, by the Law he established, gave us grace through Moses. Moses brought down those stone tablets and gave God's Law on how this relationship was going to look like. And it was good – it was most definitely grace because God was showing favor, love, and giving them credit for trying to BE in this relationship with him. And they were horrible and keeping to that relationship – just as we are! But by God's good will, by his act of kindness, the Law forgave.

Grace was given.

And now...if God wasn't already abundantly pouring out his grace – if that wasn't good enough (and it was...but it wasn't for him)...God sends his one and only Son to become *grace realized* for us. What that means is that grace wasn't realized before because grace was there but grace wasn't complete. There still was stuff to be done in order for grace to be given. Works were in play. Atonements had to be made. Sacrifices had to be offered up. Again, God's grace was abundantly on display because they did some pretty horrible things to him and each other and other people – and God's grace was always there forgiving and giving them a way out and a way back to him. But with Christ...grace realized is grace lived into WITHOUT the works. Because the Word became flesh, because God descended to us and placed the Law upon *his* shoulders. He took that grace that was already given and gave abundantly more.

But I don't think we fully understand and grasp just how amazing “grace” is. If you were to list all the gifts God has given to us...all of them would fail in comparison to grace. Wisdom, knowledge, healing powers, gifts of prophecy, gift of tongues, gift of giving and teaching and serving...all of those are good and needed and wonderful but do nothing for your soul. And do nothing for your future. Again – those are definitely blessings and gifts of God – none of us could do those things unless gifted by the Holy Spirit but again those all fail in comparison to the gift of grace. This wave after wave after wave of forgiveness, blessings, kindness, good will, favor...and credit.

Godly grace is simply understanding that we should go to hell for what we've done...simply put. And yet hell doesn't enter into the conversation. When we grasp the true concept, strength, and power of grace we begin to realize that *that* thief who hung on the cross next to Christ... is you and I (Luke 23:39-43). And those words offered to the criminal next to him are the words offered and given to you and me. “That today...you will be with me in Paradise.”

I was talking to a friend this week about a friend of THEIRS who is Muslim and for the Muslim it's this belief that you have an angel or someone always with you – and not for guidance or support but to actually keep a tally of those things you do good and those things you don't. So that when you die there is this scale that stands before you weighing your good and your bad and you better hope and pray that your good outweighs the bad. That is his belief.

To him, that's how his God works. That all people are on a point scale and so you better be good, kind and compassionate. Don't get any red marks on your final report card.

Jesus, Emmanuel, the Word, became flesh so that there would be no scale, there was no need to go to the temple and atone for your own sins because He came into this world to do that very

thing. That “works” wouldn’t work. The only thing that works...the only key to heaven, the only bridge to God, the only path to holiness is through the hope we have been given and the grace realized in Jesus Christ.

This Advent season we looked forward to the hope to come, the grace to become realized and dwell among us giving us life and light and becoming that beacon of hope in our lives. And so may you drink in the hope of Christ’s coming and dwelling into us. May you live into the credit of eternity with God granted unto you by the favor and graciousness and love of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And may your eternal hope lie in the holy promise that when he comes again, his credit and grace that was given to you not only will set you free – but has done so already.